

“Reaching for the Stars” and Interest Centers

“Reaching for the Stars”

“Reaching for the Stars” is a quality enhancement initiative of the Division of Child Care (Department of Human Services) that was developed to improve the quality of child care in Oklahoma, especially for children receiving child care subsidies. The initiative established enhanced quality criteria beyond licensing standards. Programs can receive a 1-Star, 1-Star Plus, 2-Star, or 3-Star rating. Three-Star centers must meet the enhanced Stars criteria and be nationally accredited. “Reaching for the Stars” criteria expect classrooms for young children to include a variety of materials organized into interest centers.

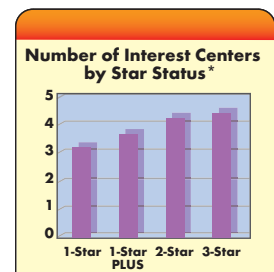
What are Interest Centers?

Interest centers have a variety of other names, “activity centers,” “learning centers,” and “interest areas” are just a few of them. Interest centers are areas within the classroom where similar materials are grouped together to encourage specific activities or experiences for the children. These areas are well defined, distinct, and easy to see (Norris, Eckert, & Gardiner, 2004).

What Interest Centers Should I Include?

According to “Reaching for the Stars” criteria, each preschool classroom should have at least the following five interest centers:

- Art
- Blocks
- Dramatic Play
- Library
- Manipulatives



Research* shows that:

- Dramatic Play is the most common center.
- Manipulatives is the least common center.

Why Should I Include Interest Centers?

Interest centers **allow children to learn appropriately**, in the ways that children learn best. According to research, children learn appropriately from (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997):

- hands-on, social, and active experiences with play
- meaningful experiences with materials given to them
- working at their own individual pace

Classrooms with interest centers have (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997):

- fewer discipline problems
- more learning and development
- learning in all developmental areas

Children in classrooms with interest centers develop in the following areas (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993):

- They develop **social skills**.
- They learn how to take the viewpoint of others and to think flexibly and abstractly.
- They learn to make good choices and to take responsibility for their own actions and choices.
- They develop their language and literacy skills.
- They develop mathematical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- They develop the beginning understanding of physics and geometry by learning balance, speed, shape, size, length, and pattern in the block center.
- They develop higher self-esteem as they practice and master skills.
- Children become more independent because they are in control of their own learning/playing.
- Children develop their small muscles in the various centers by lacing cards and stringing beads, by building and balancing, by painting, drawing, writing, and coloring, and by being able to button, snap, and zip.
- When they are given more time to play, they develop longer attention spans with the ability to focus, and they become more adventurous.
- Children develop their imagination and creativity when they are allowed to play freely with the materials, in ways that they choose, for extended periods of time.



How Do I Create Interest Centers?

CLASSROOM ARRANGEMENT

Classroom arrangement **determines how the children will act and respond within the classroom**. It determines how, what, when, and where the children will play. It determines if children will run or walk, “play with others or alone, move randomly or purposefully, and combine or separate materials” (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993, p. 51).

Classroom arrangement will either create or eliminate most discipline problems.

Classroom arrangement is also important because **“the classroom is the child’s home away from home”** (Hillman, 1989, p. 18). Therefore, it should feel inviting, comfortable, and secure.

- Divide your classroom into at least **five separate and distinct areas**: Blocks, Dramatic Play, Art, Library, and Manipulatives. Establishing these areas shows children what each area of the room is designed for and how they are to behave within each area. It also helps children play without being interrupted by the different activities going on in the different interest centers, which increases their attention span and focus. You can use rugs, furniture, or signs to divide areas (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999).
- Set up **clear pathways** between centers and **clear boundaries** around centers. This will create less chaos in the classroom and give the children more structure and security. There should be a lot of movement between the dramatic play area and the block area, so they need to be placed next to one another, with a clear, easy path between them (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993).
- **Label the shelves clearly** to show where the materials belong. You can use words, pictures, and outlines. This will help in the clean-up process.
- Consider the **noise level** of each interest center. You will want to place the noisy centers together, like blocks and dramatic play. Keep them away from the quiet centers, such as art, library, and manipulatives. It is also a good idea to put the noisy centers near the back of the room (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993).
- Consider the different **activity levels** of each center to decide how much **space** to give them. The block and dramatic play centers have a lot of large muscle movement, so they need to have a lot of space.

“Cramped space = conflicts, accidents, and messes” (Greenman, 1998, p.141).

- Think about the use of **messy materials**. Centers that include messy materials, like the art center, should be placed close to a sink and paper towels and on tile (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999).
- Consider **carpeted and non-carpeted areas** in your classroom. Carpet can be used to decrease the noise level of a center, such as blocks and dramatic play. It can also be used to make a center relaxing and cozy, like manipulatives and library (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999).

MATERIALS

- The most important thing is to have a **variety** of materials in each interest center. Some materials need to have specific uses (doll clothes), and some need to be open-ended, meaning that there is not just one way to use them (blocks). Some materials need to be familiar objects (spoons), and some need to be unfamiliar objects (chopsticks) (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993).
- The materials must be in **good condition**. Blocks need to be free of splinters, and books need to be checked for torn pages. Materials are going to be damaged, but they need to be repaired or replaced immediately (Norris, Eckert, & Gardiner, 2004).
- Have **several of the same** materials. Pay attention to the materials that are the most popular (phones, brooms), and make sure you have several. Also, make sure there are enough blocks for more than one child to build at a time, and art materials so that each child will have a chance to use them without worrying about running out. This will decrease discipline problems because children will fight less over toys (Szanton, 1997).
- **Change** your materials frequently. Add a few new items every day to each center (Add spoons to playdough.). Change the centers every week or two (Remove the playdough and replace it with clay or goop.). This is also a good time to change the theme, or subject, of the dramatic play center (Change the theme from a fire station to a post office.). Changing centers keeps the interest of the children day after day, and it helps them extend their learning. It also decreases discipline problems because you will have fewer children roaming around the room, looking for something negative to do (Norris, 2004).



What Would Be the Role of the Children?

According to Szanton (1997), children should be:

- Making choices.
- Respecting the learning materials, other children, and teachers.
- Actively learning through play.
- Focusing and thinking critically in their play.
- Functioning independently .
- Creating and imagining.
- Problem solving and solving conflicts (with some help, if needed).

What Would Be My Role as the Teacher?

- Provide a **safe** and **secure** learning environment.
- **Respect** the children.
- Give children **choices**.
- Provide lots of **time** for focused play.
- **Change** materials frequently.
- **Help** develop independent children.
 - **Help** them answer their own questions, solve problems and conflicts, and be patient as they do things for themselves, and only help when needed (Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 1993).
- **Provide materials** that encourage children to explore, discover, experiment, predict, create, think, and learn on their own (Norris, Eckert, & Gardiner, 2004).
- **Let the children decide:**
 - **Where** to play
 - **How long** to play at each interest center
 - Children should be moving freely around the room at their own pace.**
 - **Whom** to play with
 - **How** to use the materials in each interest center
 - Let them use materials creatively and move them around the room, as long as it is done safely and does not damage the materials (Sawyers & Rogers, 1988).**
- **Make sure materials are available and accessible**, at their level.
- **Interact with the children.**
 - **Play, talk, ask questions, and visit all centers** (Szanton, 1997).
- **Be aware of your attitude** towards the children and towards play.
 - **Be humorous and have fun.**
 - **Get excited** about learning, discovering, and playing.
- **Problem solve, observe the children, and change**, to make the learning environment the best it can be for your set of children.
 - Make your classroom fit the children, NOT the children fit the classroom.**
- **Provide transitional activities** to help children clean up interest centers.
 - Sing a “Clean up song.”
 - Everybody clean up 5 blocks each (Norris, 2004).

For More Information on “Reaching for the Stars”

Oklahoma Department of Human Services,
Division of Child Care

www.okdhs.org/childcare/index.html

(800) 347-2276 or (405) 521-3561

For the “Stars” Outreach Specialists near you

Gala Garrett, Program Manager: (405) 521-2152

www.okdhs.org/childcare/ProviderInfo/StarsProgram/StarsOutreachSpecialists.htm

For More Information on how to set up Interest Centers

<http://members.tripod.com/~preschoolresource/classroom.html>

[www.preschoolteachertips.com/
setting_up_the_physical_environment.htm](http://www.preschoolteachertips.com/setting_up_the_physical_environment.htm)

<http://daycare.about.com/cs/learningcenters/>

Contact Information for Accreditation

National Association
for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

www.naeyc.org

National Association for Family Child Care
(NAFCC)

www.nafcc.org

National Association of Christian Schools
International's Preschool Accreditation (ACSIPA)

www.acsi.org

The Council on Accreditation of Services
for Families and Children, Inc. (COA)

www.coanet.org/

National Early Childhood Program Accreditation
(NECPA)

www.necpa.net

National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA)

www.nsaca.org

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Sawyers, J.K., & Rogers, C.S. (1988). *Helping Young Children Develop Through Play*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Development of Young Children.

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